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LADY MACBETH: A PSYCHOLOGICAL SKETCH.

BY ROBERT MUNRO.

Timanthes, in the celebrated picture of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, asserted the skill of his art by veiling, instead of trying to depict in its inexpressible anguish, the face of Agamemnon, the father of the victim. What was not expressed was left to the imagination to portray, and, in every case, he who had any imagination at all would fill in such details as no painter could transfer to canvas.

It is something after the same fashion that Timanthes moved men more than twenty-two centuries ago that Shakespeare creates for Lady Macbeth such an interest and strange fascination. She does not often appear on the scene, and when she does she is invariably veiled. Excepting the few moments when, like a spectre, she flits before us in her night-vigil, she has on the mask, and it is not she we see, but her evil counterpart—that other self which the most of us, instead of showing to the world, seek to hide from its too curious gaze.

When we are first permitted to make the acquaintance of Lady Macbeth she is resident in her castle at Inverness. The best tradition—and there seems to be some foundation for it in scattered references in the play—speaks of her as being “fair, feminine, nay, perhaps, even fragile.” (Mrs. Siddons.) She was certainly no tall, muscular, Highland Amazon, as is vulgarly supposed, but she belonged to the true Celtic type of woman; she had a quick mind, a strong will, and a form beautiful as it was instinct with grace and animation. No wonder should her husband, the rough soldier, love her, and that, after his own way, tenderly to the last.

On our introduction to her she is alone, and has a letter in her hand. It is a message from Macbeth, in which he eagerly relates his meeting with the witches, and the supernatural sanction they seemed to give to his unhallowed ambition, as “the king that shall be.” But, to me, the most significant part of it is the closing sentence, in which, after rehearsing his story, he says: “This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightest not lose the dues of rejoicing by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it to thy heart, and fare-

well." Strong man, and full of courage as he was, he yet shuddered when brought face to face with "the swelling act" he knew must be done in order to the attainment of his hopes; and it was to her, as a last stay, he looked for inspiration and "a spur to prick the sides of his intent." *Lay it to thy heart*: little need had he for saying that. His ambition was already hers, and had burned itself into her very soul. She had looked at the matter in every aspect of it, and did not shrink from contemplating the way that must ultimately be travelled—the way of blood—that she might share with her lord the crown of Duncan.

We may be sure it was not all at once, or without a struggle, that she arrived at this terrible resolution. There is the agony of inward conflict as well as the notes of high decision in the awful invocation :

" Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, topful
Of direst cruelty ! Make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage of remorse ;
That no compunctions visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace
Between the effect and it ! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murthuring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief ! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell !
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, ' Hold, hold ! ' "

Thus dominated by the same master thought, when they at length met, it was she who was the first to allude to the matter, as if she doubted his force of purpose, and wished at the outset to throw the whole weight of her influence into the opposite scale. With rare psychologic insight she read his soul as if it had been an open book. She knew his strength and weakness, his hopes and fears, and with a skill that is almost demoniac, and too horrible to conceive as existing in woman, the weaker vessel and ministering angel, she played upon his nature with as much ease as if she were fingering the strings of her native harp. It was, how-

ever, that last touch of hers that taunted him with cowardice that made him her slave, not only in thought—for he was that already—but in deed as well. He was a genuine Celt, to whom reputation for bravery was dearer than conscience, dearer even than life itself; and so he was goaded and lashed by the “valor” of his wife’s tongue into the doing of an act from which his soul otherwise utterly recoiled.

It is sometimes asserted that when a woman is bad she is ten times more a child of Satan than the most abandoned of men; but, though history records cruel enough things against her, the accusation is certainly not true. She, no doubt, “feels the future in the instant,” and acts not so much from calculation as from the instinct or emotion strongest for the moment; yet for all that she is so constituted as to lack the muscular and nerve power needed for being such a great and persistent criminal as her brother man. Her intentions may be equally bad, perhaps even more subtle and diabolie, still she cannot carry them through as he can. The case of Lady Macbeth, which—fictitious though it be—is often adduced as an illustration of the depths to which woman can sink, really proves nothing, for, in the hour of decision, when she tried to do the deed she ignominiously failed. But, besides this, there are elements in her supposed history which put her entirely out of the reckoning. In her opening speeches we can trace signs of that confusion of thought and moral conception that are, according to modern medical psychologists, the surest preludes to the awful malady with which, we know, she was afterward afflicted; and we may infer it was with the design of indicating that tendency she was represented at the outset as acting the extravagant part she did. Brooding too long over one idea, and being thrown too much on her own company, it was clearly the intention of Shakespeare to represent her, from the very first, in the attitude of one suffering from the effects of an ever-increasing monomania.

The deed, preceded by such conflict and passion, had at length been accomplished; and, in its turn, it became the starting-point for a new development in the character of each.

Macbeth had qualities which might, under other circumstances, have developed into a better life. He was a brave man, loved by his soldiers and trusted by his king; he was not insensible to kindness; he shuddered at the thought of violating the rites of hos-

pitality; and, above all, he had strong affection for his wife. But, in the step he took in murdering his kinsman and guest, he seemed to have put between himself and the possibility of better things a chasm which could not be crossed. From that day he began to drift away from all that was good. The evil of his heart became unreined, and it hurried him madly on in the dark pathway which now opened before him. Even as highly excitable persons often maintain a strangely impassive calmness when surrounded by the bustle of activity, so he sought, by heaping crime upon crime, not only to make sure his own position, but, by stifling every movement of what was noblest in his nature, to bring a kind of transient peace to his troubled spirit.

With Lady Macbeth it was far otherwise. She had no way of escaping from her own thoughts, no way of plunging into such a course of action as might help to keep away the remembrance of the past or to relieve the present. It was hers to suffer silently and alone. She had obtained the object of her desires, but it was, in the attainment of it, turned into fire and ashes on her lips. The crown was placed on her head, but it weighed upon her heavier than lead. Among all her gettings there were some things she did not count upon, and of these were remorse and its black train of crushing years.

When the crime was being enacted she spoke lightly of it :

“The sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil.”

“A little water clears us of this deed;
How easy is it then!”

But see her now in her night perambulations—a very picture of woe—wringing her hands in anguish because the blood-spots will not out, and sighing her very heart away because “all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten her little hand.” She turns and looks, but she does not see, for, though her eyes are open their sense is shut; and it is an indescribably sorrowful face that meets ours—more sorrowful by far than that of Guido’s “Beatrice Cenci”—for it is the face of one upon whom the shadows of despair are lengthening out; and the darkness more to be dreaded still, the extinction of reason itself, is fast settling.

Signor Salvini objects to the walking scene being assigned to Lady Macbeth, and hints that originally it must have been intended for Macbeth, though afterward given to Lady Macbeth, possibly enough, at the request of some charming actress who did not find her part otherwise sufficiently important. The reason he adduces for this view is the necessity why Shakespeare should maintain the individuality of his personifications; up till now it was *he*, not *she*, who betrayed signs of weakness and remorse ("Impressions of Some Shakespearean Characters," by Tommaso Salvini).

It is strange that Salvini, one of the noblest scenic interpreters of our great dramatist, should have fallen into this mistake. Apart altogether from the incongruity of representing the brawny chieftain stalking about the stage in "the trappings and suits" of night, there is another reason—the psychological one—why this part should have been acted by Lady Macbeth. Macbeth had already, by his career of evil, paid the immediate debt of nature, and given play to his feelings even to the point of weariness; and there need be no doubt that, like many another criminal, he slept as soundly as if Innocence descended nightly to close his eyelids, and the angels of purity hovered around to defend him as he slept. But she had no outlet at all for the misery that was gnawing at her heart. She had to bear it in all its secret reality; and, as long as she could, she bore it with wonderful fortitude. She even tried to be cheerful and unconcerned, while all the time her heart was breaking, and her mind tortured past endurance. But she could not long hope to maintain this enforced cheerfulness; for nature, if prevented from having its normal course, will, like water that is dammed, force its way through some other channel. Its "compunctionous visitings" may be repelled for a season, but it is only that they may come again upon the soul with redoubled energy. So much is this the case that were there no walking-scene for Lady Macbeth, no representation of her as bowed under the weight of her woes, she would have been no woman, but a demon incarnate—worse than the weird sisters and a rival in wickedness of Hecate herself. It is only when she is asleep, when the will is bound, and the senses closed to all but the soul's dominant thought, that the mask is laid aside, and we see her for what she is—a veritable woman—our sister—for whom, as much as we may detest her crimes, we can still cherish feelings of pity and compassion.

Instead of there being a break in the life-development of Lady Macbeth, there is a marvellous consistency in all the parts of it. This is the more remarkable when we remember that little or nothing was known in Shakespeare's day of the physiological and mental conditions under which it is supposed to grow. As to somnambulism, the most incredible views were held. By some it was regarded as a prophetic or ecstatic state in which the subjects of it were believed to be under the influence of angels, and gifted with a true power of divination. Others, again, found a conclusive explanation of its origin in the imperfect performance of the baptismal ceremony. This is why, in that age, somnambulists were frequently called "the ill-baptized." Ideas equally crude and indefinite were current as to mental disease. Even Theophrastes Paracelsus (1493-1541), who has been so much extolled as the founder of modern Medical Psychology, could speak about insanity with less real knowledge than falls to the lot of any ordinarily intelligent reader of the present day. "That man," said he, "is sick in mind in whom the mortal and immortal, the sane and insane spirit do not appear in due proportion and strength." His method of cure was equally explicit: "What avails in mania except opening a vein? Then the patient will recover; this is the arcanum; not camphor, not sage and marjoram, not clysters, not this or that, but phlebotomy."

There is nothing of this unscientific vagueness in Shakespeare. With a knowledge of psychology which was far in advance of his time and which may be said to have anticipated the most recent findings, he always speaks of the abnormal conditions of mind with marvellous accuracy. The outlines of his picture of Lady Macbeth might, for that part of it, have been sketched by a Maudsley, or a Morel, or any nineteenth-century specialist. There is, first, the intellectual and moral disturbance, then the crime and the consequent depression, finding, by and by, expression in somnambulism—which is, in the words of Baron Feuchtersleben, "sometimes a precursor of dangerous neuroses, as of epilepsy, catalepsy, and the like"—and there is, lastly, the "mind diseased"—the permanent "sorrows" and "troubles of the brain" and heart—to which no medicinal balm or "purgative drug" can minister any deliverance.

The end of this weirdest creation of the poet's imagination is

alike touching and tragic, as it is in keeping with all that went before it. To Macbeth, life, though it had more than its meed of evil, was a thing to be desired, and he died bravely fighting in its defence. With Lady Macbeth, however, life was not outward but inward, not a thing of pleasure but a weariness and an intolerable burden, from which there was no hope of escape, and so she raised an unfriendly hand against it.

It is a fancy, but I cannot help thinking it was when asleep and in her night-vigil she did the deed. Dr. E. Mesnet relates ("Archives générales de médecine," 1860, vol. xv) that he was witness to an attempt at suicide begun in one and continued in the other of two consecutive attacks of somnambulism. And so it may have been here. Life has its nightly side as well as the side that is to the day; and there was a kind of fitness in her case it should have been then. She who, when awake, restrained her will with such indomitable power, had, at last, when pressed by the shadows and the suggestions of the night, to yield, and throw off forever the mask she had worn so long.

LETTERS ON FAUST.¹

BY H. C. BROCKMEYER.

I.

Contents: Distinction between subjective criticism and objective criticism, the former stating merely the relation of the work criticised to the critic's feelings; the dangers of subjective criticisms of this kind; defects of criticisms based on biography; based on gossip; literary dish-water; the objective criticism that investigates the idea of the poem and sees the parts in relation to the whole.

DEAR H.—Yours of a recent date, requesting an epistolary criticism of "Goethe's Faust," has come to hand, and I hasten to

¹ The first nine of these letters are reprinted here from Volumes I and II of this Journal, where they appeared in 1867-'68. Having recently received Letters X to XX from the author, completing the series by a discussion of the Second Part of Faust, we have decided to reprint the first series in order to bring together, for the present readers of the Journal, this remarkable contribution to literary criticism. We have added to each letter an index to its contents.—EDITOR.